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# A Study of Aspirations

*The development of a "self-anchoring" scale makes it possible to study the hopes and fears of people in different countries and to find where each man thinks he stands in his own world*

by Hadley Cantril

U.S. citizens—known for their material prosperity and a certain smug contentment in it—may be surprised to learn that samplings of public opinion in West Germany, Brazil and Cuba have shown that the peoples of these countries are even more buoyant about their recent progress and more hopeful of the future. Americans may be chastened as well to learn that these peoples also identify their personal well-being more closely with the fortunes of their countries. These very general statements represent the first findings of an experimental effort to develop a technique for making comparative studies, across national boundaries, of the concerns and aspirations of people around the world. Such studies may offer a systematic approach to many fundamental questions about people and their societies in the present period of rapid social change and political evolution: What sort of order and stability do people require of viable social and political systems? What sort of demands do existing systems impose in turn on the individual? What are the characteristic concerns of people in societies that are breaking away from tradition or from a colonial past? Under what circumstances does the preoccupation of people with elemental material needs give way to the flowering of more subtle and complex interests? Can one discern any sequential phases in political development?

The difficulty here is twofold. On the one hand, it is necessary to get people to voice their concerns and aspirations in their own terms; on the other, this information must be secured in such a form that the responses of different individuals and groups of individuals either within the same society or in different societies can be compared to one another in some meaningful way. As soon as the investigator sets up categories of information to be secured, with the aim of obtaining comparable and quantitative data, he runs the risk of imposing arbitrary boundaries and thereby blurring the richness, uniqueness and variety of the individual response. And yet people's reports of their concerns must be fitted into some categories if comparisons are to be made.

My colleagues and I at the Institute for International Social Research in Princeton, N.J., have undertaken to meet this difficulty by designing a "self-anchoring" scale for the comparison and measurement of human concerns. Starting with the premise that each individual creates for himself his own world of reality, in which he assigns significance to what he perceives in terms of his life's purpose, we set out to elicit his own view of his world. The self-anchoring scale allows an individual's expression of his concerns, values and perceptions to establish the top and bottom points of a self-defined measurement continuum. On this "first person" scale he is able to estimate his present estate on the basis of his recollection of the past and his hopes and expectations for the future. When many such scales are laid down side by side, they reveal significant similarities and contrasts in people's estimates of where they stand in their respective worlds.

Since we began our field work in 1957 we have surveyed representative samples of the adult populations, usually 2,000 individuals, in the U.S., West Germany, Brazil, Cuba, the Philippines, Israel, Panama and the Dominican Republic. Surveys are now under way in Poland, Yugoslavia, Nigeria and India. In addition, in nine countries we have surveyed approximately 100 members of the national legislative bodies of each. Wherever possible we have enlisted social scientists or survey experts who are citizens of the country being studied to serve as our interviewers. Where no such individuals were available we have arranged for the training of competent local people. In order to ensure uniformity of procedure, either Lloyd A. Free, my principal associate in this work, or I have visited each country for prolonged periods to assist in organizing the research. On occasion we have had to spend considerable time teaching local personnel the principles of making a social survey, from the drawing of a probability sample from census data to the conducting of an interview.

In Brazil, for example, where our survey was done by an extremely able Brazilian research group, Free had to work out with them a probability sample for



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the whole rural area of the country, because that area had never before been covered in a social survey. Many of our Brazilian interviewers had to ride horseback in order to get to their respondents. In the rural areas of the Dominican Republic our interviewers were at times threatened by machete-wielding natives, who suspected that the interviewers' activity was a subterfuge for locating conscripts for the armed forces, after the precedent set by census takers under the dictatorship of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo.

A special problem, in view of the nature of our research, was to secure faithful translation of our questions into the native language. This was not easy even in the case of other European languages. In the Philippines interviews had to be conducted in seven different languages, and in India we had to translate questions into 13 languages to obtain an adequate population sample.

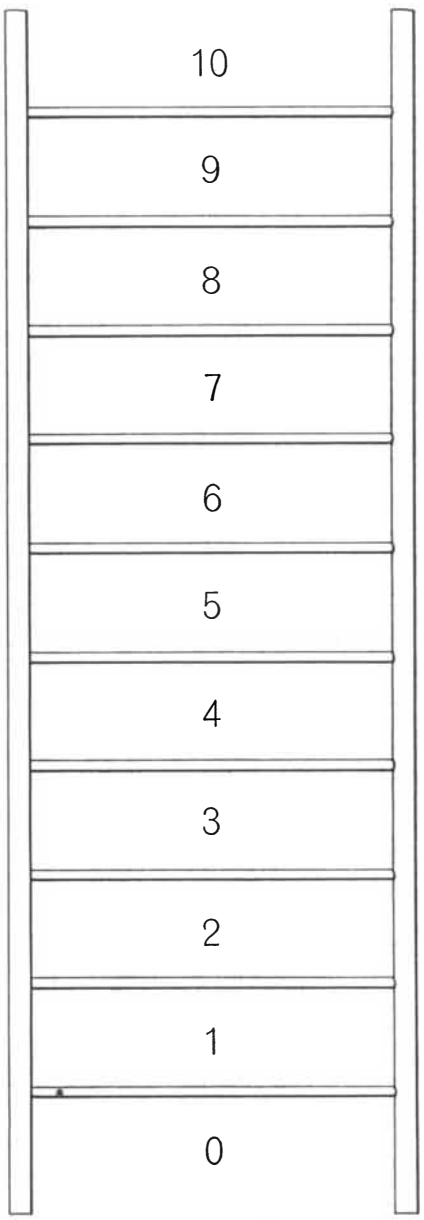
In an interview the respondent is first of all asked the following question: "All of us want certain things out of life. When you think about what really matters in your own life, what are your wishes and hopes for the future? In other words, if you imagine your future in the best possible light, what would your life look like then, if you are to be happy? Take your time in answering; such things aren't easy to put into words."

The interviewer records the reply in as verbatim a fashion as possible. When the respondent falters, the interviewer may prompt him with questions, being careful not to ask leading questions, until there is nothing further to report. The interviewer then continues with this question: "Now, taking the other side of the picture, what are your fears and worries about the future? In other words, if you imagine your future in the worst possible light, what would your life look like then? Again, take your time in answering."

Again the responses are recorded verbatim with whatever prompting is necessary. The interviewer then shows the respondent a drawing of a ladder with 10 rungs [*see illustration at left*] and says: "Here is a picture of a ladder. Suppose we say that the top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you. Where on the ladder do you feel you personally stand at the present time?"

As he speaks the interviewer points to the top of the ladder and then to the bottom, and when he comes to the question of where the respondent now stands on the ladder, he moves his finger rapidly up and down it. When the respondent has indicated the appropriate rung, he is asked: "Where on the ladder would you say you stood five years ago?" Then he is asked: "Where do you think you will stand on the ladder five years from now?"

Although there is nothing sacred about the number of rungs the ladder might contain, experience has shown that the zero-to-10 interval is easily understood. There is nothing crucial about the interval of five years either, but we find that many people have difficulty recalling where they were more than five years ago and equal difficulty foreseeing the future more than five years hence. The device of the ladder has proved meaningful and workable in all groups except among certain primitive peoples, where it was tested in the preliminary phases of the study. Some untutored Bantu in South Africa found a crude sketch showing climbers on a hill more intelligible.




**DRAWING OF LADDER is presented to a subject after he has established his own "self-anchoring" scale by defining his personal aspirations and fears. The subject is asked to assume that the top of the ladder is the best possible life for him and the bottom the worst possible, and to judge where he stands now and where he was five years ago and will be five years from now.**

The underlying self-anchoring principle embodied in this procedure can, of course, be used to elicit information on a wide variety of subjects. For the purpose of our studies, in addition to asking people to tell us what they regard as the best and worst possible life for themselves and where they stand on the ladder, we ask them a complementary pair of questions about their hopes and fears for their country. With the top and bottom of the scale thus again defined, we once more present them with the picture of the ladder and ask them to indicate the present, past and future positions of their country as they see them on this scale.

Perhaps the most crucial step in this research is the coding of the topics mentioned by the respondents into meaningful categories that will make it possible to compare different social and national groups. We had to devise a code at the outset that would handle any type of response given by any person anywhere, without having to force a response into some category not entirely appropriate. From pilot tests of the technique we constructed a code that after several revisions now contains approximately 145 items.

When a small group of people who are going to do the coding on a given run of responses has worked with us for a few days, we find well over 90 per cent agreement on the categories to which all of us assign the responses. To keep in mind what the categories refer to we select from the interviews a number of illustrative quotations. When a response is put into the category of "Improvement of present standard of living for self or family," we are able to see at a glance the wide variation in the content of this aspiration for people in different groups and in different countries and thereby to study the extent to which it is functionally or psychologically equivalent.

In certain countries we have found it necessary to add a few new items to accommodate indigenous preoccupations. In West Germany, for example, the ques-



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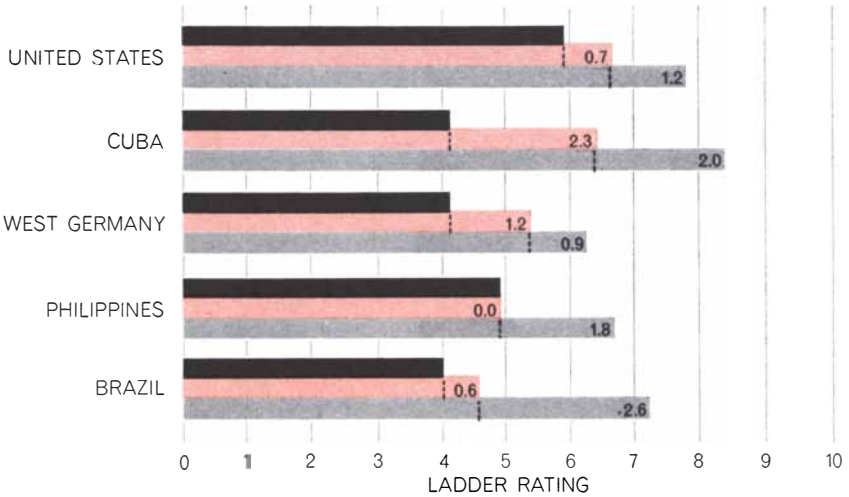
tion of German reunification came up often enough to require a new item; in Israel enough people were concerned with the preservation of the integrity of Jewish culture to call for a special category. After any such categories have been added, we generally find that not more than 5 per cent of all topics mentioned have to be lumped under the heading of "Miscellaneous." We keep as categories in our code any topic that turns up in 5 per cent or more of the responses in any country. The coded results, together with the coded ladder ratings, are then transferred to punched cards for subsequent tabulation and statistical treatment.

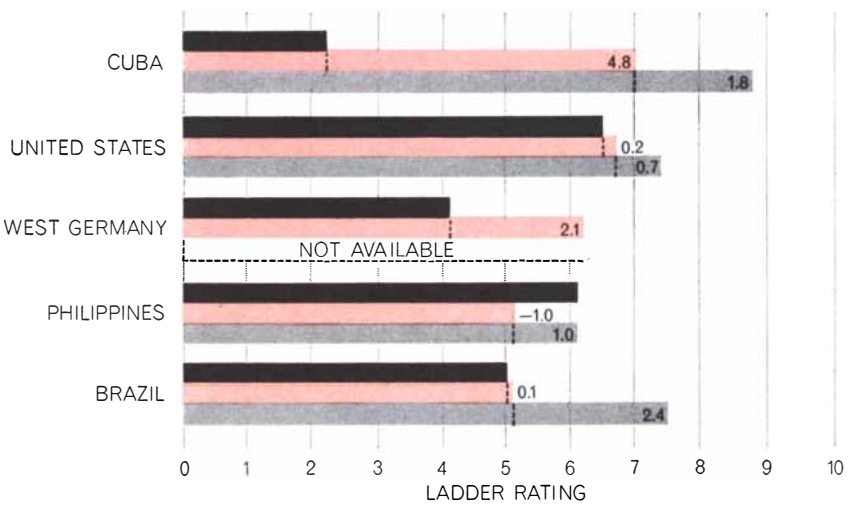
So far we have completed our tabulations for only the five countries represented in the charts that illustrate this article: the U.S., West Germany, Brazil, Cuba and the Philippines. The field work should be completed in another six months, and we will then need time for systematic analysis and interpretation of the rather large mass of data. The results presented here are for purposes of illustration of the work that is in progress.

From tabulation of some of the general categories into which we sort all the items in our code, certain interesting uniformities and differences among national groups emerge. A few common denominators characterize the concerns of people in all five countries: concern with their economic situation and standard of living; with their own health and that of the members of their families; the desire to provide adequate opportunities for their children. These interests cut across class boundaries within each country as well. Concern for an improved standard of living was mentioned as often in the U.S. as it was in poorer countries, such as Cuba and Brazil; in the U.S. persons in the upper- and middle-income groups were just as concerned with the question as those in the lower-income group. For one upper-income American it took the form of "I want enough money to own a boat and send my four children to private preparatory schools"; for the wife of a worker in Havana the wish was "to have enough food and clothes so we won't have to beg for these things."

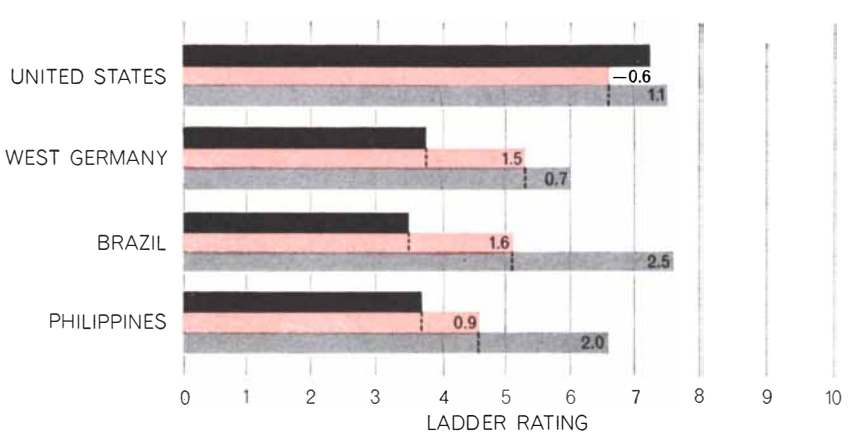
Such nonmaterial values as emotional maturity, independence of thought and action, recognition by others, feeling of accomplishment and so on [*see illustration on page 45*] were mentioned as personal aspirations by about a third of the people of Cuba. About a fourth of the Cuban respondents mentioned these values in association with fears that they




**PERSONAL LADDER RATINGS** are charted for five countries. The bars indicate the average responses to questions on where "you personally stand at the present time" (*color*), where "you stood five years ago" (*black*) and "will stand five years from now" (*gray*). Numbers at ends of bars show increments from past to present and present to future.




**NATIONAL LADDER RATINGS** were obtained in the same way. As in the preceding chart, the three bars represent (*from top to bottom*) the past, present and future ratings. The ends of the ladder were assumed to be "your greatest hopes" and "worst fears" for the nation.




**LEGISLATORS' NATIONAL RATINGS** are presented for four countries. Parliamentarians in Brazil and the Philippines were more satisfied than the public with their national progress.



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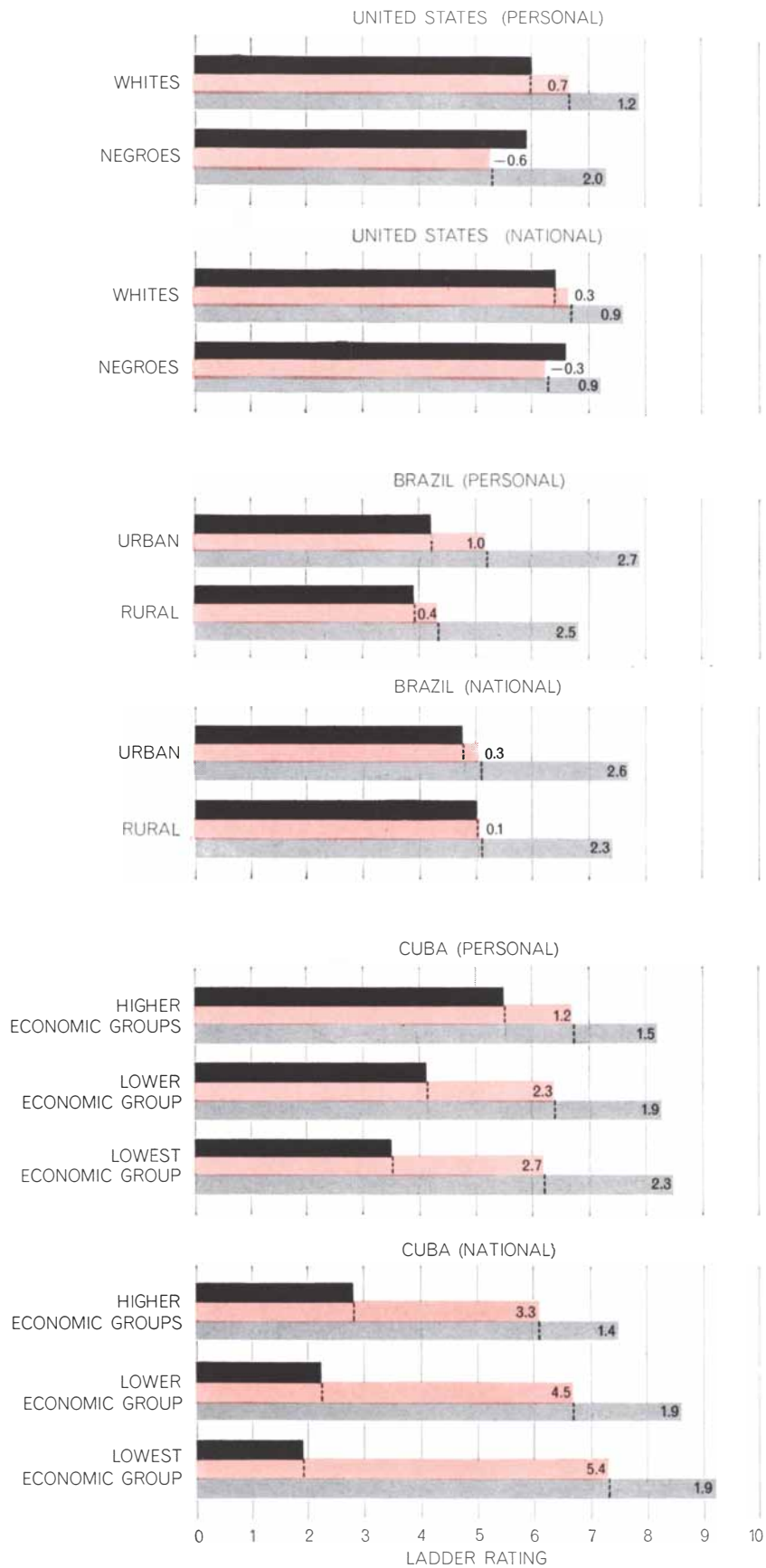


**DIFFERENT OUTLOOKS of various social and economic subpopulations in each country are reflected in their differing personal and national ratings, such as those shown here. Again the bars represent average ratings for past (*black*), present (*color*) and future (*gray*).**

might not attain their life goals. In the U.S., on the other hand, only a fifth of the respondents expressed concern with these values and only 3 per cent mentioned them in answering the second question in the interview with regard to the "worst" outlook for their lives.

In response to questioning about concern for nation, the citizens of different countries again showed differences in attitude. Among Americans, for example, hope for peace and fear of war were mentioned by nearly 60 per cent; among West Germans this percentage was 70 and among Cubans it was only 10. Concern for the independence of their countries was expressed by about 10 per cent of the Cubans, West Germans and Filipinos interviewed but by less than 5 per cent of the Brazilian and U.S. citizens. Whereas respondents of all nationalities voiced a uniformly high concern about their personal economic well-being, only 6 per cent of the citizens of the industrial countries mentioned such concern in speaking of the future of their countries. In the underdeveloped countries of Cuba and the Philippines, on the other hand, at least a fourth expressed hopes that were classified under the code item "An improved standard of living or greater national prosperity through technological advances—increase in the rate of mechanization, use of modern scientific advances, nuclear energy; greater productivity in industry or agriculture; development of natural resources."

Within each national population group our interviewers found significant divergence of outlook among the rich and the poor, the city dweller and the farmer, the skilled worker and the businessman, the young and the old. Some 45 per cent of U.S. Negroes, for instance, expressed the wish to have their own house or apartment, something mentioned by only 21 per cent of U.S. whites. In Brazil more than half of those in the low-income groups in urban communities craved a decent or better standard of living, something that concerned less than a fourth of middle-class Brazilians in the cities. Whereas half the West Germans over 60 years old indicated their concern for good health, only about 10 per cent of those under 30 are as yet worrying about health. For the small Moslem population in the Philippines the most widespread desire was to have great wealth, mentioned by a third of them; less than 1 per cent of the small Protestant population there expressed any such concern. In Cuba the fear of Communism was expressed by 15 per cent of those with a



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university education but by only 3 per cent of those who had only an elementary school education.

It is the wealth of material of this kind volunteered by the respondents that, in each case, establishes the top and bottom of the self-anchoring scale and so lends meaning to the more summary ladder ratings of the respondents. In considering the ladder ratings it is well to bear in mind when the data were gathered in each country. In the Philippines the study was made in the spring of 1959, while Carlos P. Garcia was still president and before the victory of the reformist candidate Diosdado Macapagal; in Cuba the study was made in the spring of 1960, a little more than a year after the revolutionary government headed by Fidel Castro had seized power; in Brazil, in the spring of 1961 not long after the election of the progressive candidate Jânio Quadros, whose presidency was soon afterward terminated by his resignation. All three of these countries were deliberately selected for study at these times because they were in a state of ferment. The study was conducted in the U.S. in August, 1959, and in West Germany in September, 1957.

The "personal" ladder ratings for the citizens of all five countries show a prevalence of hope for the future and, with the exception of the Philippines, a sense of progress from the past to the present. Over the 10-year period embraced in the interview the Cubans and the Brazilians expressed an experience and an expectation of greatest total progress: 4.3 steps on the ladder from the past into the future in the case of the Cubans and 3.2 steps in the case of the Brazilians. At the time we made our survey the people of Cuba thought they would have climbed on the ladder in the next five years to a higher step (8.4) than that to which the Americans aspired (7.8). The contrast between the sentiments expressed by the Cubans and the Brazilians and the relatively low standard of living prevailing in their countries provides a measure of the discrepancy between the subjective self-anchored ratings and the objective situations that actually obtained in those countries. Obviously the anchor points in the minds of the respondents in these countries are very different from those in the minds of the respondents in the U.S. and West Germany. There is ample testimony to this effect in the record of the interviews that preceded the ladder ratings in each case. The self-anchoring scale makes it possible to secure insight into the diverse worlds in which people of different nationalities live and to compare their outlooks on those worlds.

The "national" ladder ratings show much the same contrast among the outlooks of the people of the three developing countries and the two industrially advanced countries. Again the Cubans and the Brazilians showed the warmer optimism. In the total 6.6 climb from the past to the future projected by the Cubans for their country, it is interesting to observe that they thought they had already achieved a 4.8-step advance by the spring of 1960. The Filipinos show the only negative rating, a one-step decline in their country's present situation compared with the past; this decline was barely offset in their expectations for the future.

Of interest is the degree of correlation between the personal and the national ladder ratings. In general it appears that when people have a sense that they are successful participants in a national political movement, there is an appreciable relation between the ratings they assign to their personal situation and to that of their country. For the Cubans in the spring of 1960 this correlation was a high .43, in contrast to the low .08 correlation between the personal and the national ladder ratings of Americans.

The studies of the attitudes of parliamentarians in four of the countries show some interesting divergences from the public attitudes in these countries. In the two developing countries, Brazil and the Philippines, the legislators evinced considerably more satisfaction and hope than their electorates. In the U.S., on the other hand, members of Congress thought that the country had gone backward during the preceding five years, which was in disagreement with public opinion in the country at large—perhaps in part because 1958 had been a recession year and because this was a Democratic Congress during a Republican administration.

Analysis and comparison of the ladder ratings obtained from various groups in the several countries yield additional significant insights. The U.S. Negro, for example, thought he was worse off personally at the time of the survey than he had been five years earlier, but he also thought the gap between his rating of himself and of the country five years thereafter would have closed. Compared with U.S. white citizens, he rated both his personal estate and the condition of the country lower. In Brazil the rural population correctly estimated its situation as being less favorable than that of the urban population of the country; this is apparent not only in the difference between the personal and the national ladder ratings given by the rural population but also in the difference between the personal ladder ratings of the rural and the urban populations. In the contrasting ladder ratings of the three Cuban income groups one can see plainly the psychological hold and sweep of the Castro revolution among the country's poor; it was the poorest who had the brightest vision of the future for themselves and their country.

The sampling of our results presented here illustrates the kind of information that becomes accessible through application of the self-anchoring scale. Above all, the technique makes it possible to see and compare the wide variety of ways in which different people look at the world, or, more properly, the wide variety of worlds in which people live their lives.

1. EMOTIONAL STABILITY AND MATURITY—peace of mind, mental health and well-being; sense of humor, understanding of others, etc.; harmonious life.
2. BE A NORMAL, DECENT PERSON, leading a quiet life, harming no one.
3. SELF-DEVELOPMENT OR IMPROVEMENT—opportunity for independence of thought and action, for following through with own interests; further study; reading for nonleisure purposes; no "rut."
4. ACCEPTANCE BY OTHERS—recognition of my status by others; to be liked, respected or loved. (Exception: Where reference is restricted to family or marriage, code under Col. 4-1.)
5. ACHIEVE SENSE OF MY OWN PERSONAL WORTH—self-satisfaction; feeling of accomplishment; life of content. (Note: Recognition by SELF as contrasted to recognition by others.)
6. RESOLUTION OF ONE'S OWN RELIGIOUS, SPIRITUAL OR ETHICAL PROBLEMS.
7. TO LEAD A DISCIPLINED LIFE.
8. MISCELLANEOUS aspirations regarding one's own personal character.

Y. Nothing to code in this column.

**CODING of widely different answers as to aspirations and fears for self and nation is a critical phase of the investigation. Each answer is fitted into one of 145 categories. This small sample of categories deals with personal characteristics, one of the subtopics in the personal-aspirations section.**



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